

THIS IS NOT A LANDSCAPE ANY LONGER

CONVERSATION BETWEEN TONI HILDEBRANDT AND
IRENA LAGATOR PEJOVIĆ

Toni Hildebrandt: Dear Irena, I would like to start our conversation with some thoughts on your sculptural work *This is Not a Landscape Any Longer* (2020). It is an installation that immediately struck my mind, because it combines a complex historical narrative with a persuasive gesture of abstraction. What I mean by this can perhaps be better understood in comparison with some modernist sculptures: for example, with Menashe Kadishman's spatial interventions in the 1970s (*Broken Glass Door*, 1971, Museum Haus Lange Krefeld; *Broken Glass*, 1976, Rina Gallery, New York). In Kadishman's formalist work, the *contamination* of glass as historical ruin is not present at all, and I think this is important to emphasize: that in fact, you both make formalist decisions here, but you also inscribe historical narratives into them.

Thus *form*, I would argue, becomes *allegorical*, creating, as Paul de Man put it, "a distance to its own origin." In fact, your usage of fragments of broken façade glass from a very symbolic architectural facility turns the idea of that building or the remains of it into allegorical language. How would you describe these formal qualities? Is there a category that seems fitting to you to describe its aesthetics? The sensation certainly goes beyond the beautiful, but it is perhaps also different from the sublime; perhaps one could speculatively capture it with the idea of a 'broken beauty'. An insightful formulation by the Russian filmmaker Kira Muratova comes to mind here. For her cinematographic practice – informed by the fall of the Soviet Union – she once coined the conceptual figure of a mirror, broken but held together by the mon-



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tage, because it is framed. According to Muratova “[...] this broken mirror has a frame. In the frame there are the shards of the mirror. In the mirror everything is disfigured, but it has a beautiful frame.” Do you think we could borrow this metaphorical image for your work, and especially for *This is Not a Landscape Any Longer*? It occurs to me that the display, the installation, the careful work of showing resembles this “frame” that holds the shards together.

Irena Lagator Pejović: I was approaching the formal qualities you referred to in relation to my piece *This is Not a Landscape Any Longer* as those potentialities of an artwork that are able to challenge our perception about the world as we know it and optimally awake a sense of criticality within the audience, and even a certain deconstructivist approach and critical distance from what we think is unquestionable. Already from the title of this piece, the audience is invited to think and question what is *Not Any Longer* as it was before, what is different here and now, thus confronting them with an emphasis on the notions of legacy and value as such. And this questioning, while observing something formally familiar or known as a form of a landscape, is actually creating their new proximity to



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what they see here as artwork, but also to what they see around them in their everyday surroundings. The label indicates that the materials that compose the installation are fragments of broken façade glass from the same architectural facility in which the work is exhibited. The audience is therefore informed that what here stands for a landscape, which it is not, cannot any longer – even if it is part of the edifice in which those processes of observing and understanding are inter-

twining – also be interpreted as an urban, architectural, socio-political and above all, cultural landscape.

In relation to defining a strict category that could as closely as possible describe this piece's aesthetics, I would rather, on the one hand, like to point to the processes and concepts of reconstruction, recreation – or even better, of repair – but on the other hand, to repetition through the ethics of artistic research as well as artistic responsibility that were guiding me to the completion of this piece. Furthermore, I wanted to provide the information to the audience, not the form or any formal artistic qualities, but the proper information about what is going on with this particular building (and therefore cultural landscape) that they did not notice – especially what its specific history is. Since we are dealing here with the contemporary transitional and globalized culture, the allegorical can only be understood as a political-artistic act of making visible and questioning nontransparent productions, or sensitizing the critical explorations of the hidden structural powers that shape our world. In a way, the artist and the artwork are then a kind of the glocal anthropologists of our contemporaneity who index those things we are not aware of. In the sense of sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the artwork then *aspires to more than allegory*. Specifically, part of the newly constructed façade (of the renovated building) was broken – that is why the glass pieces on the floor are not part of our current architectural landscape any longer. Moreover, this piece is not an illustration of the landscape as such, but information about what already exists, here, now, and from the past, and what it is an artistic duty to show, to make visible, to make explicit, and thus to inform the audience. I mean, in this particular case, but also outside of its context,

what exists is the double content: the heritage of alternative, socialist modernism, and, on the other hand, the current instability and fragility, passivity and fragmentation of social and cultural responsibility, of our social being and thinking as such. That is why I hope this piece sensitizes the audience to their critical proximity as a necessary value structure for our troubled and unstable times today, whether we are talking about the margins or the centers of the world. Therefore, all these aspects weave a network of relations and meanings that this piece deals with, contributing to its speculative approach.

Thank you for the complexity you brought in, because while mentioning the work of Muratova in relation to this piece of mine, we are dealing with not one, but two complex historical narratives, their differences and similarities. As for similarities, both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia vanished during the early 1990s. Yugoslavia experienced what can be referred to as a political-economic as well as an ethnic accident or de-cohesion that resulted in the creation of multiple sovereign states – or better, national-neoliberal economies and strategies. In this sense, yes, we can recall the conceptual figure of the broken mirror coined by Muratova that still reflects a feeling – or even better, a memory and potentiality – of the common and shared space, for in our current new age of divisions, exodus and extinctions, it is more than necessary to re-examine and revisit the concepts of internationality, community and solidarity, togetherness and connectedness. As for the differences between those former unions, one concept stands out, and that is the concept of Yugoslavia's soft socialism and self-management. Apart from its free education, free health insurance and culture for all, the most open borders of all socialist countries, its alternative mod-

ernist architecture, memorial and cultural landscape production was specific to its character of treasuring the notions of collectivism, community and solidarity among inhabitants. However, with the transition to capitalism, the majority of the institutional architecture of the former and once rapidly modernizing country and system has turned into ruins of socialist modernism, ready to serve the purposes of privatization and re-appropriation – but, on the other hand, and the way Srđan Jovanović Weiss put it, as a form of success, pointing to its currently reappearing act: “[...] What has vanished always reappears in unexpected forms that surprise us.” Therefore, I do share your opinion about showing a ‘frame’ that holds the shards together that you borrow from Muratova, especially because in the original edifice of the branch of the National Bank of Yugoslavia in Cetinje, erected between 1960 and 1964, whose author was the Yugoslav architect Petar Vulović – our present-day Art Gallery, in which the piece (*This is Not a Landscape Any Longer*) we are talking about was exhibited – there were a number of relevant scientific, historical and artistic references and qualities incorporated, which, however, vanished with the renovation of the building by national-neoliberal forces and privatizations, just like socialist Yugoslavia did. For this installation (*This is Not a Landscape Any Longer*) to be made, I gathered the glass pieces as they were falling, over a several-months period, from the new glass façade down to the street. I gathered them one by one, manually, not in any attempt to suggest composing it back its actual renovated appearance, but because I was aware of the theories of symmetry and proportions by Pythagoras, Plato and Euclid integrated into the original building by its architect in the early

1960s. I agree that this piece it is about a careful work of showing, but of showing what already existed without any nostalgic tone, especially if what exists now are just shards and remains in search of a meaning that float in our collective amnesia.

T.H.: To continue this line of thought, my second question regards the relation of your work, in more general terms, to the philosophy of history we have already started speaking about. Jacques Derrida, an author who is very familiar to you too, wrote after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in response to Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, a very surprising book on Marx. In *Specters of Marx* (1993) he coined the concept of hauntology, a sort of “ontology of ghosts”. And in another book of that time, *Cinders* (1982/87), which again we could relate to *This is Not a Landscape Any Longer*, he thinks of “cinders” as the ideal metaphor for what *remains* of historical destruction. It is the absolute metaphor for both the trace and the ruin, for the remains as both rest and resistance. Cinders are in this sense always *in-between*: in-between ashes and embers, in-between forgetting and remembering, in-between the past and the coming future, neither fully burnt-out nor still burning, but rather in an aporetic state of undecidability. From this perspective, I would like to ask you how you work with the concrete *remains* of the cultural memory of former Yugoslavia, and especially the very utopian thought of Yugoslavia’s third way? How would you describe the transition from utopia into dystopia, if this is not a too-simplified model, and how do you think this change or turn affects your work? Would you say that utopia still haunts a dystopian realist vision of your world(s)?

I.L.P.: As someone who grew up in the 1970s and '80s in Yugoslavia, who directly witnessed both the society of solidarity and its ruin that followed after the dissolution of that socialist federal state from the 1990s onwards, I'm interested in making no emotional bonds with what I exhibit, because only in that way of right distance, of showing the bare facts – or even better, of no identification processes with the displayed content in the sense that Peter Weibel speaks about in his essay *Anatomy of Art: Art and Power. Culture and Power, Complicity or Contradiction, Affiliation or Opposition* from 1999 – can the art offer relevant means for annulling and dismantling the reproduction of violence, of war, or of exclusion. The transition and change from utopia into dystopia influenced my work in a direction of artistic and theoretical research – or better, artistic responsibility – that most often speaks about loss of shared community, loss of country and cultural values that are now replaced with uncertainties, precariat, vanishing and washing knowledges and histories mainly through wild privatization, ethno-nationalism and corruption processes, through what we can call active or progressive dystopia. You're right, I do work with what *remains* of historical destruction or with ruins of society in times of ruinous contemporary capitalism, underlying the ecological tone and critique of anthropocentrism, and this is because I am interested in concepts of preservation and repair, of horizontal culture, decoloniality and de-hierarchization, for those ideas are worth considering for our present and our future.

That is why and how I came to coin the concept of *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*. In capitalism, we declare ourselves to be Societies of Limited Responsibility (GmbH, SaRL, SRL,

O.O.O., d.o.o. ... that are variants in languages and geographies and in legal entity and sector of the economy). Therefore, I tried the inversion, the mutation – or better, the elaboration, the repair of such an idea of society into its more open and inclusive version based on the ideas and experience of solidarity and sociality – to imagine the potential new model of sociability and collectivity in society, the distribution of the demos in the sense of Rancière, i.e., *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*. Rancière once stated that *politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part*. Similarly, my quest for unlimited responsibility is an attempt at imagining a model of society alternative to the various dominant forms we know in the ongoing globalized financial capitalism. Unrestricted responsible behavior is so rare today. If it exists, it is rather where there is no representative power, but only a love of life that stems from an understanding of equality and interconnectedness. I started my visual quest for it during the time of my artistic residency at the Neue Galerie in Graz in 2006. I drew, for one winter month, countless minuscule rotating humanoid pictograms, faceless and without identity, each of which was filling its own squared, net-like space. None of them disturbed the next one. Their multitude and mutual respect produced a society of *peaceful co-existence*. And at the end of that long and slow drawing process, it was there, in front of me, repeated, visualized – the society that counted on as many people as possible providing them with free education, culture and healthcare for all; the kind of society I was growing up in during the 1970s and '80s, but that from the 1990s onwards started to fall apart, to vanish and transform itself into a field of multiple borders



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Irena Lagator Pejović, *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*, 2006

Irena Lagator Pejović, *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*, detail, 2006

and new walls instead of continuing the processes of their deconstruction. A utopian society before dystopia.

It is important to state that my dealing with this past is not nostalgic, since I was a child in late 1970s. But I travelled to all those *brotherhood and unity* gatherings across Yugoslavia in the early

1980s, and I experienced its values of multiculturalism first-hand. But my critical stance towards our contemporaneity and problems of our present allows me to learn and acknowledge that the potentials for socialist cultural revolution in the region I grew up in were unfinished and not developed to such level that we could all profit from them for our future nowadays. As if they had been interrupted in the blossoming phase when there were striking efforts to connect social and economic developments. However, we can use the term 'nostalgia' here, but only if what we assume that what is meant by it is an emancipatory potential of those lived but interrupted ideas in relation to questioning our current unstable times.

That is why I'm interested in Yugoslavia's 'third way', or its own way of making a specific socialist country and system that

differed from the Soviet state socialism after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 and exclusion of Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau. After this split, which in recent theories is called the *first socialist decolonialization*, Yugoslavia established a system of resistance to dominant forces of the Eastern and Western Blocs called the workers' self-management, which nowadays can stimulate us to rethink our position again and again, but can also allow us to ask questions of social and economic urgency in our troubled current times. Because Yugoslavia's social context was a unity of the multi-ethnic and multicultural societies that counted on the creativity of the many for their common future, its socialist version of modernism, and the social role of art, the way I remember and experienced it as emancipatory, can be perceived as an insightful model of non-hierarchical thought.

Therefore, one of the ways in which the change from utopia into dystopia influences my work and research can be seen in a method by which I treat the new and the original: if we do have evidence of a utopian context in action, and if we witnessed its degradation, then producing the new, the way I see it, should imply revisiting the erased utopia or the work with what we already have and what is already there from the past. In other words, I'm interested in the ability of art to make constant encounters with reality: to deconstruct, decolonize, demystify and unmask it, even at the level of repeatability and appropriation, a level that might generate social changes while simultaneously questioning methodologies of contemporary art as such – what can perhaps be close to a Brechtian alienation effect, where spaces of democracy and peace are possible.

That is where I find the relation to Derrida's *Specters of Marx* insightful –

precisely in what he develops as a *multiplicity of Marxisms* – for understanding and confronting realities, always analyzing new economic and political circumstances, philosophy of responsibility, criticism and auto-criticism, re-evaluations and responsibility of friendships and new needed forms of common space, or what he calls the *New International*. His unveiling of the paradoxes of our contemporaneity and deconstructive thinking about neoliberalism concerning the economic wars between the trade blocs and underemployment, the planned growth of foreign debts, migration and climate crises, and construction of new walls, to mention just a few most visible ones, is a process necessary for trying to build new hopes of a more equal world – what Derrida calls a duty while analyzing Marxism.

That is also why my art practice often relates to history and why I do find the ideas of More's *Utopia* compelling and meaningful – not in the light of a completely positive model, but more in the sense of a model of society that constantly questions social and political problems through dialogue and challenges the capacity of critical thinking. Therefore, I can say that utopia still haunts a dystopian realist vision of my world(s), because it is utopia and its potentials that help us understand and perceive the manifold crises we are living in today that are all coming from the malfunction of the current system and the rise of neoliberal hegemony.

T.H.: To perhaps only ask my previous question once again, but from another angle: I am thinking here also of an essay by Pasolini, which I know you find fascinating too: *Il vuoto del potere*, which a friend of mine, Evan Calder Williams, recently translated as *Power's Hollow*. Pasolini writes about

the “disappearance of the fireflies,” and he describes with this disappearance a fatal transition, reversal and turn in history, which he also calls a cultural or anthropological genocide. What I find interesting here and what I think is not yet fully understood is the status of this transition or reversal from the early Marxist utopia of “der Traum von einer Sache”, the “dream of something” (Pasolini’s first novel is called *Il sogno di una cosa*) into that nameless and sometimes fatalist “something” that has already happened – moreover, irreversibly and without clear explanations, a little like in that famous Dylan song, “you know something is happening but you don’t know what it is [...]”. If we take this as a transition from dreamy utopia into the dystopian “power’s hollow” and the politic-ecological thought of the “disappearance of the fireflies,” we could ask, of course, what happens precisely *in-between*. In fact, in the song, the line goes “something is *happening*”: thus the process is actually emphasized. How do you think your work relates to these issues in our current socio-political and ecological moment? Excuse me for asking so patently, but would you situate it on the side of utopia, dystopia or rather in a space and time somewhere in-between?

I.L.P.: I believe the process of being accountable or responsible is the one we should devote much more attention to during the time of the in-between, as you say. It is this in-between that we must critically understand, and my work relates to it contextually: it is based on the research, and only after the processes of questioning, examination and in some cases, poetic postulation, that the actual art work takes place. Pasolini did notice the disappearance of the fireflies, but an even more troubling question would be

whether we have noticed the disappearance of symbiosis as a process. Namely, dealing over the years with the three notions that constitute our global legal economic term of SaRL (*Société à Responsabilité Limitée*), I begin to wonder whether, because our collective responsibilities are not yet unlimited, greed and degradation will grow in infinite numbers of ways. Since we have never been unlimitedly responsible towards both human and non-human, the potential of unlimited responsibilities remained imprisoned on fundamentalist, totalitarian and primitive levels. This explains my critical thinking towards the previously mentioned capitalist economic model that I turn into its opposite in order to speak about both: a critique and a possible postulation. So far, we have been responsible only in a limited way of understanding the social responsibility. We take it for granted and use it only up to the level at which it accomplishes our profit-oriented goals. In the Capitalocene, it is not even hidden, but publicly used since the seventeenth century for both fair and *unfair trades*.

To speak about the in-between, as you say, if we look closer, the word *responsibility* contains three different parts of words: res- (a thing), response (to respond) and ability (to be able to). If we pair them with limitation of responsibility, it turns out that our ability to see how things really are in the big world and to give our response is restricted and therefore limited. We could liberate the unlimitation of responsibility and try the inverse logic of the well-known limited one, which is obscuring the beauty of common values such as clear air, waters, nature, of being alive and having the right to health care, for instance. But we do not know how to do that, because we are told everywhere that our responsibilities are limited: in law, in language, or, for

example, on fiscal receipts – that vanishing textual proof of our daily consumption in order not to remember it for too long, but to consume again, the sooner the better: better for the current system, not for us. So, the process you are speaking about, and which Pasolini named as “something” that is happening, I see as the in-between: i.e., the ruinous character of a system that is exploiting and alienating all living beings on the planet, both human and non-human. That is our shared problem in the present-day reality. As an artist, I tried to imagine the opposite and postulated it as *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility*, but that also led me to the process of making visible those bare facts, to the series of works that are making visible the mechanisms of the system that is shaping our lives through language, economy and law that is barely distinguishable to citizens and completely undistinguishable to the labor force masses from which the right to free education has been taken away. One of those pieces of mine, *Knowledge of the Society of Limited Responsibility*, is maybe worth mentioning here, in the ongoing in-between, and that is an ongoing series of handmade books of different dimensions that are made out of original customers’ fiscal receipts. I quote both, the fiscal receipts and the inscription *Société à Responsabilité Limitée*, in order to make more visible and tangible the meaning that is used by the pragmatic capitalist system for the construction of our surroundings and of us. While the books are getting produced and grow over time into a city-like model, the content from

the surface of the fiscal receipts bound between the covers of those books is vanishing with time, due to the fact that it is a thermal paper on which the content bought is inscribed only with the temperature from the cash register – i.e., without the use of ink.

Until now, our current generation has lived in an era of economy. The change we could think of concerns whether we could be able to produce an era of ecology wherein the economy would be a derivate, a product, and not vice versa. If we look structurally and transformationally, togetherness precedes economy. If we could realize that we need a surplus of common responsibility instead of a surplus of values, some new horizontal sensitizations might occur. The inversion of surplus into common value for a more responsibly organized shared space, a space of eco-coexistence, ethical togetherness, unlimited logic and science of responsibility zones that we can also name as cultural utopia for a better world, which implies those abovementioned unblossomed and unfinished potentials of the utopias of the past. That is why I find it important and even urgent to imagine and build our common future and common interests beyond anthropocentrism – i.e., in a way more heterogeneous, equal and symbiotic than the one we know at present – and to show to the audience through bare facts the interconnectability of the many of ‘in-betweennesses’ in order to make them aware, awake, attentive and resistant to the dominant seductions of global capital.